

FEMA approves Yuba County levee work

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[By Ben van der Meer/Appeal-Democrat](#)

FEMA has informed the Three Rivers Levee Improvement Authority it will accredit 29 miles of levees in south Yuba County for adequate 100-year flood protection, giving homeowners there a reprieve against higher flood insurance rates.

The letter, also sent to Yuba County, affirms the levees were built over the last half decade to the Federal Emergency Management Agency's specifications. The agency is wrapping up a remapping process for determining flood risk in the county, with the maps set to become official next February.

"It's been such a long road to see this thing finally through the process, there's almost no words for it," said authority board member and Yuba County Supervisor Mary Jane Griego, who lives in Olivehurst. "To hear it so soon, I'm happily surprised and shocked."

Some areas in Linda, Olivehurst, Arboga and Plumas Lake may still be mapped into an area with higher flood risk because of drainage issues.

Paul Brunner, executive director of Three Rivers Levee Improvement Authority, said certification is a big milestone for the authority, which was created in 2004.

But it's also a milestone, he said, in that having accomplished its primary goal of improving levees and getting FEMA certification, the authority may now enter a period of less activity.

Certification also indicates FEMA officials aren't concerned with flood risk from the Goldfields area on the Yuba River. Some flood-management watchdogs have said a 1950 flood in the Goldfields could happen again if local officials don't address flood protection.

Brunner said his understanding is FEMA officials are only concerned about 100-year protection, and the Goldfields wouldn't be an issue in that consideration. State law requiring 200-year protection may require more work in the Goldfields. Brunner said the authority and other local agencies are studying the issue and will have a report later this year.

Tom Eres, an attorney representing a Wheatland-area homeowner who's been critical of the authority, said he hopes there's more than good wishes to assure certainty about the Goldfields.

"We all hear it, people talk about it, and we say, 'Not a problem, just show us a letter from an engineer that states there's no concern, whatever agency it might be,'" Eres said.

If there's no determination of a problem in the Goldfields, he said, then there's no reason to map any part of south Yuba County in a flood zone.

Authority officials are working this summer on the last identified portion of necessary levee work, that of fortifying levees along the south side of the Yuba River in Linda. That work is scheduled to be done either this year or next.

Brunner said Yuba River work has provisional accreditation from FEMA, to be formalized after the work is finished.

Being mapped into a high-risk flood zone would bring skyrocketing flood insurance rates and a possible moratorium on new construction, as seen in the Natomas area of Sacramento.

In Sutter and south Butte counties, residents are voting on a measure to enact levee-repair assessments to avoid a similar situation on their side of the Feather River.

Griego said the certification is important because it gives business owners considering entry into Yuba County assurance their investment makes sense.

Even during an economic downturn, she said, businesses are plotting where to expand or establish next.

"As word gets out about our achievement, they'll be looking to come here," she said. "We need to go out and beat our drum."